

Mackenzie at Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Inc. CITC Healthcare Training

There are times when life seems held together by delicate strings; cut one, and everything falls apart. The one crucial string tying Mackenzie Madison to a stable life was her great-grandmother, and on the day her great-grandmother died unexpectedly, Mackenzie felt things begin to unravel. “I didn’t have anyone else here,” she recalls.

Mackenzie had moved to Anchorage from Spokane two years prior to take care of her great-grandmother. A single mother with one young daughter, she found herself balancing work and school with her role of family caretaker. Until her great-grandmother’s death, this balance was a struggle, but she was determined to make things work.

Even though she had earned her certification as a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), she wasn’t working in healthcare, and things were very challenging. “I was only employed through taking care of my grandma,” Mackenzie recalls. “When she passed, I had just moved into my apartment. How was I going to pay my bills? Pay my rent? I had so much on my plate.”

Fearing eviction, Mackenzie turned to what she considered her last resort. Before her great-grandmother passed away, she had gone to Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) for childcare support, but she had been unaware of its other services, such as healthcare training through its Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program from the Office of Family Assistance.

“I was surprised at all the things they could help with,” Mackenzie says of CITC. Through its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, she found help with her basic needs, including school clothes for her and her daughter, gas for the car, and assistance with paying rent. She says, “Before TANF, I struggled a lot. My priorities were rent and my daughter, but I couldn’t keep up with anything else. With CITC, it’s been a much smoother ride.”

Through its Healthcare Training program and a partnership with the Alaska Vocational Technical Education Center (AVTEC), CITC offered tuition assistance and helped streamline Mackenzie’s transition from earning her Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) license to becoming a Registered Nurse (RN). “CITC basically took care of everything,” she says. “They set up testing and helped me get CPR-certified [in cardiopulmonary resuscitation]. I didn’t have to go through two people at two different organizations, and that helped a lot with keeping my stress low while I entered a new program.”

Not only was CITC’s array of helpful programs a surprise, but the organization opened a door into a world Mackenzie had missed out on for most of her life. “At one point, CITC offered Native classes where I could learn how to make a kuspuk. I also took a beading class to make Native earrings,” explains Mackenzie, who is part Inupiaq. “Growing up in Washington, I didn’t feel part of my culture at all,” she says. “I’m 27 years old, and I didn’t know anything about my culture until recently. I didn’t even know how to pronounce Inupiaq!”

Now, Mackenzie says, “I just want to give back to my community and be a good role model. It’s hard to imagine my life without CITC.” With her interest in natural medicine bolstered by CITC nutrition classes, she says, “I want to teach people how to take care of themselves, and how to prevent diseases just by basic good eating habits, hygiene, and exercise.”

Her goal is to work for the Alaska Native Medical Center once she becomes an RN, though she’s not sure in what capacity. In one breath, she lists three possibilities: working in the emergency room, becoming an operating room nurse, or continuing her focus on natural medicine. Thanks to the support she received from CITC’s programs and staff, Mackenzie says, her future holds endless potential.